

Justice Delayed: An Analysis of Local Proposals for Black Reparations



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In this article, I document and analyze all municipal, state, and county-level efforts for Black reparations in the United States. Most efforts resemble H.R. 40's exploratory commission model, possibly due to policy path dependency. Few geographies have allocated funding for committee recommendations, but some have allocated funds for committee activities. Only Evanston, Illinois, has allocated and distributed funds to qualifying residents. On average, cities with reparations efforts demonstrated mixed performance on metrics related to Black wealth, with insufficient evidence to suggest local Black-White disparities are more severe than the nation as a whole. Several proposals emphasize the Black-White racial wealth gap as emblematic of slavery-derived disparity, but no municipal or state proposal can rival the scale or potential of a federal program.

Keywords: local reparations, slavery reparations, path dependency

In the wake of the deaths of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, the nation underwent what some have named the “summer of racial reckoning” (Chang, Martin, and Marrapodi 2020). Tens of thousands of Americans took to the streets in protest of police brutality, the disparate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color, and continued disappointment and outrage over rampant racial inequality. Between May 25 and August 22, 2020, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) recorded more than ten thousand protests (Kishi and Jones 2021). More than 80

percent of these protests were directly related to the growing Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement or the ongoing pandemic. In addition to attending public protests, citizens engaged in telephone and mail-in campaigns such as those for police reform, investment in Black communities, and support for H.R. 40 (Campaign Zero 2020; M4BL 2020; NAARC 2020).¹ No level of government was insulated from the swell of public outcry from May through August of 2020.

Founded on existing calls to address racial inequality and hastened by tensions reignited

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1. Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act, H.R. 40, 117th Cong. (2021).

by police brutality, the question of reparations exploded into the political terrain. In July 2020, the city council of Asheville, North Carolina, voted to form a reparations committee to explore compensating the city's Black residents (Burgess 2020a). Providence, Rhode Island, and Evanston, Illinois, seemingly followed suit, the latter of which appropriated \$400,000 in grants for qualifying Black households (List 2020; Treisman 2021).² The tide of local reparations only grew in the three following years. Cities from Massachusetts to Oklahoma, from nonslaveholding states to the industrial north, have stepped into the growing spotlight on local disparity, intervention, and reconciliation. Beyond empty commitments to racial equity passed in the wake of the nation's sorrow, cities, counties, and states across the nation have formed commissions, conducted research, and arrived at conclusions about their roles in harm and healing.

The advent of local reparations has not been without controversy. Mere months after Asheville's historic vote, the city's reparations committee failed to meet resident expectations in a short-staffed Equity Office (Burgess 2020b). The city of Chicago's efforts stalled due to political infighting with no clear path for the future (Cherone 2020). Evanston's reparations program, which has garnered significant positive media attention, continues to face criticism for its strict criteria for eligibility (Bosman 2021; Misra 2021). Still, these municipalities are cited as beacons of hope for longtime advocates of Black reparations. The rapid proliferation, alleged underprovision, and controversy of these proposals raise the question of what the current state of local reparations is.

LOCAL REPARATIONS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The word *reparations* describes redress given for an abuse or injury. Although the colloquial definition of the reparations does not exclude use by other groups, this analysis considers what might be referred to as Black reparations. To define Black reparations, I look to the framework offered by William Darity and Kirsten

Mullen in their book *From Here to Equality*, which defines the process of reparations with the acronym ARC: acknowledgment, redress, and closure (Darity and Mullen 2020). Acknowledgment requires the receipt of a formal apology and commitment to the pursuit of redress by perpetrators and beneficiaries. Redress, which can be in the form of restitution or atonement, should make adequate amends for the injury as defined by the injured party. The process is then ended with closure, in which the injured group affirms their satisfaction with the restitution and formally closes the claim for reparative action.

Arguments for reparations are generally organized around the idea that historic, recent, and present acts of racism are influential in creating modern-day racial inequality. More specifically, reparations today are typically proposed for the purpose of or in concert with closing the Black-White racial wealth gap, which describes the ratio of the difference in wealth between Black and White households at the median, typically measured as the total market value of a household's tangible and intangible assets. Academics have sought to quantify the impact of slavery on the racial wealth gap, with estimates of the cost of slavery and discrimination ranging from \$5.9 trillion to \$16 quadrillion (Craemer 2015; Darity 2008; Craemer et al. 2020). Empirical analyses of the impact of ultrapoverty paint highly racialized pictures of intergenerational mobility from as early as 1880, particularly when a father is initially recorded as low income (Collins and Wanamaker 2017).

Still, Black reparations remain unpopular to the general population (Johnson 2020). Only 5 percent of Republicans and 49 percent of Democrats believe that the government should make cash payments to Black Americans who are descendants of slaves (Younis 2019). Most of America still does not believe that the connection between slavery and its various derivations and Black Americans' economic lag relative to almost all other groups is clear. Equally important to acknowledging the continuing unpopularity of reparations is acknowledging

2. Evanston's pursuit of reparations predates the events of 2020 with the passage of Resolution 58-R-19, Commitment to End Structural Racism and Achieve Racial Equity (City of Evanston 2019).

that the topic has appeared to have grown markedly less unpopular since the summer of 2020. By late June that year, overall opposition to reparations was reported to be only 63 percent, a 14-point decrease from 1997 (Langer 2020). Subsequent polls between 2020 and 2023 typically place opposition from 60 to 65 percent (Sharpe 2021, 2022, 2023).³

Reparations policies have gained traction across all levels of government. House subcommittees held hearings on slavery reparations in 2019 and May of 2021. Proposed H.R. 40/S.40 (2023), introduced by the late Representative John Conyers more than twenty times, calls on Congress to “study and develop reparation proposals for African Americans.” Additionally, an increasing number of localities have considered or committed to considering reparations and reconciliation for their role in slavery, though the effect of such proposals remains to be seen.

The Current State of Local Reparations

Before attempting to analyze the number of current local reparations efforts in the United States, it is important to create a distinction between those efforts explicitly referred to as reparations and those that are reparative. For this research, I use the term reparations efforts to encompass all local, county, and state activity identified as reparations by policymakers. I have not included efforts that did not include the word *reparations* in their reparative resolutions, because their lack of acknowledgment violates the first requirement of Darity and Mullen’s ARC framework. Austin, Texas, and Durham, North Carolina, for example, passed equity resolutions that resembled early repara-

tions resolutions (namely, the establishment of an investigative body to track disparate outcomes for marginalized populations) but failed to identify the proposal’s purpose as in pursuit of reparations or redress for injury.⁴ This omission of *reparations* may be an attempt to advance pro-equity policies without the political history that the term reparations commands. Such resolutions are likely to benefit Black populations most (particularly if qualification for a program is predicated on socioeconomic status), but more research is needed to determine whether more universalist framing for reparations-like equity policies reduces public opinion barriers for similar policies explicitly enumerated to be reparations.⁵

Between December 2019 and March 2023, nineteen municipalities introduced and passed reparations initiatives in the United States. These cities include San Francisco, Berkeley, and Los Angeles, California; Wilmington, Delaware; Iowa City, Iowa; Chicago and Evanston, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; Amherst, Boston, and Cambridge, Massachusetts; Greenbelt, Maryland; Kansas City and St. Louis, Missouri; St. Paul, Minnesota; Asheville and High Point, North Carolina; Providence, Rhode Island; and Burlington, Vermont.⁶ Nearly all municipalities have passed resolutions related to exploring local reparations through evidence-based policymaking between 2020 and 2023. Evanston, Illinois, is the only local reparations effort to precede this window given that the city committed to pursuing reparations in 2019 (City of Evanston 2019). These efforts are supplemented by Mayors Organized for Reparations and Equity (MORE), a coalition of twelve mayors across the country in support of reparations

3. Although public opinion is crucial to understanding barriers to reparations, responses are sensitive to question order, wording, and framing, making polling data difficult to aggregate (for more, see Rhodes et al. 2024, this issue).

4. The Durham equity resolution does express support for H.R. 40 (City of Durham 2020).
Resolution in Support of Federal Action to Increase Racial Equity.

5. Some participants in local reparations efforts expressed ambivalent feelings toward the term reparations. Shelby County Commissioner, Edmund Ford said, “If you want to despise the word [reparations], fine, but let’s not despise the work we plan on doing.”

6. Washington, D.C., Council Bill 250152, “Reparations Foundation Fund and Task Force Establishment Act of 2023,” was introduced to the D.C. Legislature on February 24, 2023. It is currently under council review after public hearing on July 15, 2023.

to address racial inequity. Member mayors, who represent cities from Denver, Colorado, to Carrboro, North Carolina, agreed to the coalition's three core tenets: support H.R. 40, form reparations advisory committees in their respective cities, and implement a "pilot reparations program targeted at a cohort of Black residents" (MORE 2020).

Overwhelmingly, municipal reparations resolutions originate from city councils rather than mayors or city managers. Providence, Rhode Island, is the only city in which an active reparations proposal originated from the office of the mayor. The cities of Greenbelt, Maryland, and Detroit, Michigan, are the only major exceptions. Rather than having been proposed and passed solely by the city council, the citizens of Detroit and Greenbelt voted to pursue municipal reparations via ballot initiatives on November 3, 2021. The Greenbelt initiative, which the city council voted to include on the ballot in August 2021, called for the establishment of a "21-member council to review, discuss and make recommendations related to local reparations" (Associated Press 2021). Ballot initiatives offer much-needed insight into constituent-level support of municipal reparations in their respective towns. Both the Greenbelt and Detroit initiatives passed with extraordinarily strong support, the former with 62.5 percent and the latter with 77 percent (Associated Press 2021; Williams 2021).

There are three active, state-level reparations efforts in California, Washington, and New York. Six additional states—Georgia, New Jersey, Connecticut, Oregon, Vermont, and Massachusetts—introduced legislation to form a reparations study commission between 2020 and 2023. California Bill A321, creating a reparations task force, was introduced by Black Democrat and Secretary of State Shirley Weber. Washington Bill 1474 deviates from the typical creation of the task force model, creating a home ownership program and fund for communities adversely affected by historic housing practices. Though not discussed at length here, the New York General Assembly passed S.1163 to study reparations in December 2023. No pro-

spective or active efforts originate from state governors in the form of executive orders.⁷

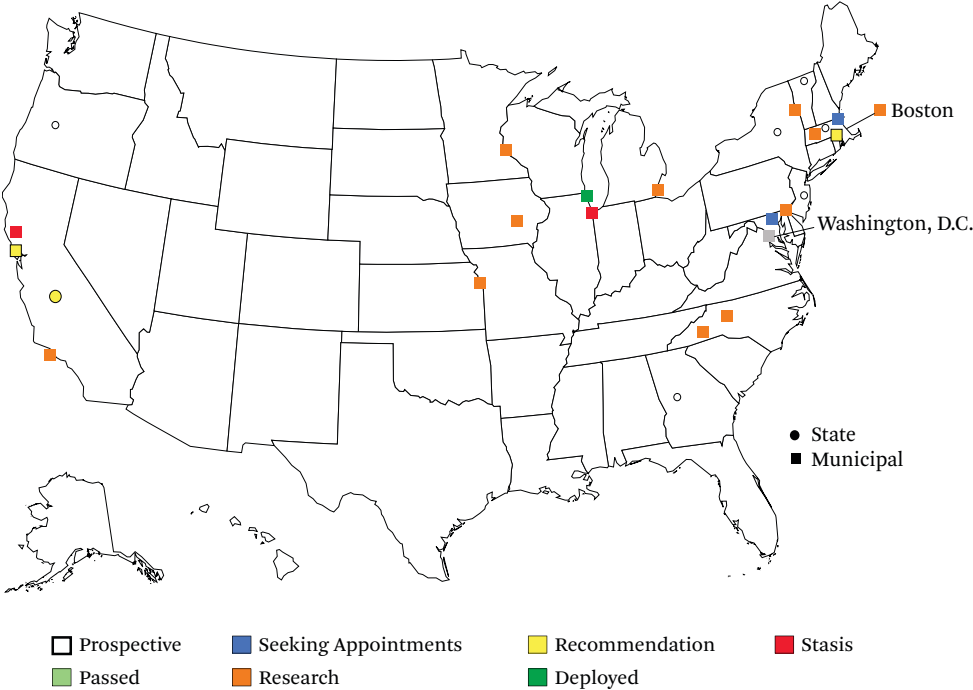
Counties, despite their historic significance in the southern United States, have relatively few reparations efforts. Not including those efforts that encompass that are both cities and counties (City and County of San Francisco, and Asheville, Buncombe County, North Carolina), five counties have passed resolutions to create reparations task forces: Alameda County, California; Fulton County, Georgia; Kalamazoo County and Washtenaw County, Michigan; and Shelby County, Tennessee. Given the relatively small number of counties with reparations efforts, they have been omitted from the socioeconomic status analysis following this section. Should more counties form reparations task forces or policymaking trend away from municipalities and towards counties, further research is necessary to consider shared characteristics between the emerging group.

As shown in figure 1, municipal reparations efforts are primarily in cities in the northeastern region of the United States. North Carolina and Maryland are the only southern states to have municipal reparations efforts. There were no municipal proposals for Black reparations in the South as of March 2023, though the region still home to most of the nation's Black and potentially slavery-descended population (Tamir et al. 2021). The Fulton County Reparations Task Force is the only reparations effort in the South. State-level efforts are similarly distributed across the Northeast, West, and Pacific Northwest. Georgia, a former Confederate state, is the only exception.

Eligibility varies within reparations resolutions and across geographies. Most local resolutions refer to potential recipients as Black, African American, or otherwise of African descent. Some references are municipality-specific (for example, Black Los Angelenos). Some resolutions use plainly contradictory language. The City of High Point, North Carolina, describes beneficiaries as African American citizens [of High Point] and descendants of enslaved Africans (City of High Point 2022). These two groups may contain a significant overlap,

7. Several states have introduced and passed resolutions in support of H.R. 40, including Illinois, Texas, California, New York, and Connecticut.

Figure 1. Current Municipal and State Reparations Proposals Map, March 2023



Source: Author’s map.

Note: The optimal way to view figure 1 is in color. We refer readers of the print edition of this article to <https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/10/3/140> to view the color version.

but the former likely includes individuals who migrated to High Point after the Civil War. The resolution lists injustices from enslavement to present, “disproportionate treatment at the hands of the criminal justice system,” suggesting the target recipient group is Blacks or African Americans rather than those descended from slavery. The Burlington resolution uses similarly conflicting language. Whereas at one point the population in need of apology is “African Americans living in Burlington as a result of the institution of slavery,” later language reads “African descendants living in Burlington” (City of Burlington 2020). The latter group, of course, includes post-Civil War immigrants. Although this article makes no attempt to comment on the validity of including post-Civil War Black migrants in reparations proposals, proposal feasibility may be hindered by unclear eligibility.

The Berkeley consulting contract uses the phrases “Berkeley’s descendants of slavery” and “African American community,” but not

interchangeably (City of Berkeley 2021, 1). The language suggests that the two groups are markedly different for the latter’s experience of slavery, and specialized recommendations may be necessary to address harm in both groups. Three resolutions identify eligible populations with similar demarcation (for example, African Americans, with a special consideration for African Americans who are descended from slavery). Only three resolutions restrict eligibility to descendants of American chattel slavery. Providence and Greenbelt also identified Indigenous individuals and people of color as possible recipients (City of Providence 2020, 1).

State-level reparations efforts demonstrated less variation in eligibility. Most perspective efforts emphasized a direct, shared lineage to a qualifying individual and an enslaved person in their reparations legislation. The California Reparations Task Force, in addition to the prospective efforts in Massachusetts and Georgia, used the phrase “African Americans, with a Spe-

cial Consideration for African Americans Who are Descendants of Persons Enslaved in the United States.”⁸ Only Oregon and New York would permit eligibility for Black Americans who may not be descended from the enslaved, or otherwise commit to employing different qualifications for eligibility.⁹ The tendency toward what Brooke Simone (2021) refers to as “victim-based” reparations over “group-based” reparations may reflect some anticipation of greater potential for legal challenges in the case of the latter. A more cynical interpretation, of course, is that the 57 percent of Black Americans that indicate they believe they are descended from slavery is a smaller beneficiary population than all Black Americans (Cox and Tamir 2022). All five county efforts, in contrast, generally mirrored municipalities’ identification of Black and African American as the target population.

Most municipal reparations efforts have followed the same institutional pathways. First, a municipal government introduces and passes a resolution recognizing Black-White disparity and establishing a volunteer commission to act as a fact-finding body for exploring reparations in the municipality. This may be termed the *reparations resolution*. Individuals are then appointed to the commission after an application period. The commission then enters a fact-finding phase, during which the commission researches the governing body’s role in perpetuating racial disparity. At this point, a commission may be prefunded (meaning commission activities are funded) or funded (meaning funds have been allocated for future policy recommendations). Figure 2 demonstrates these institutional pathways from resolution adop-

tion to recommendation. The City of Berkeley is the only exception to this rule. Rather than a committee, the Berkeley City Council voted to hire a consultant to “develop policy recommendations for reparations in Berkeley” (City of Berkeley 2021, 1).

When funding is designated, funding sources vary wildly. Evanston, Amherst, and Cambridge used revenue for recreational cannabis taxes to create reparations funds. The use of recreational cannabis taxes has long floated in the local reparations policy space and continues to be proposed as funding sources for developing proposals (Tribble 2018).¹⁰ Funding for these proposals preceded commission recommendations, unlike that of the City of Providence.¹¹ Funding for the Providence, Rhode Island’s recommendations were sourced from the American Rescue Plan Act.¹² Because the recommended interventions use ARPA funding, they may not be restricted to members of a particular identity class. Therefore, qualifying populations include “Indigenous People, African Heritage People, Qualified Census Tracts and Neighborhoods and Residents Facing Poverty” (City of Providence 2022, 6). San Francisco, despite delivering the required recommendations, had not adopted or identified funding for the recommended policies as of March 2023.

The active and prospective state and county-level efforts generally followed the above model. County-level proposals, such as Fulton County’s, were passed after a majority vote on a reparations resolution. All county resolutions established a task force or commission of between five and thirteen members. After introduction to the state’s legislative assembly

8. California General Assembly Bill 3121. <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/JU/JU10/20210217/111198/HHRG-117-JU10-20210217-SD027.pdf>.

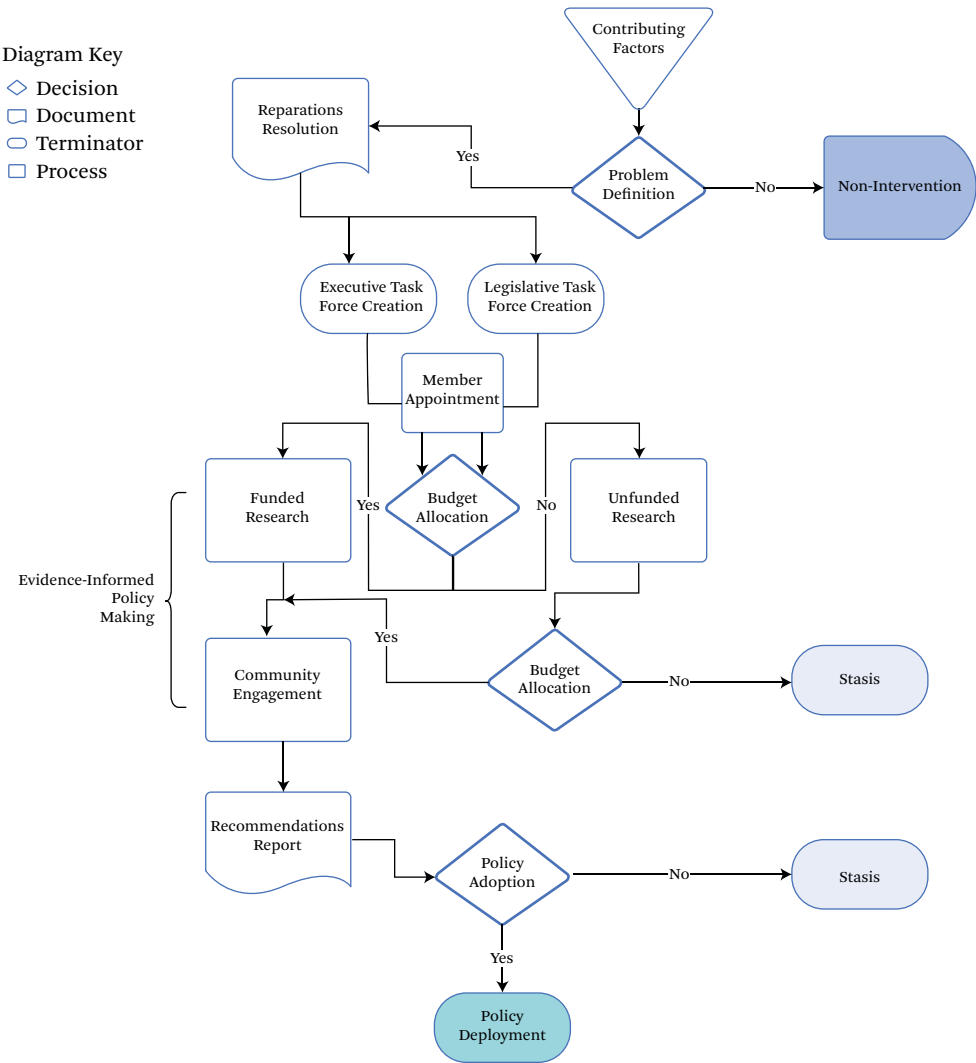
9. For example, San Francisco requires potential recipients meet a series of requirements, including residence in the city at the time of its discriminatory housing policy. Descent from an enslaved American is a possible qualification, but other permutations may also result in qualification.

10. Thomas Babucci’s 2020 unpublished paper “Taxing Marijuana and the Road to Reparations” offers some econometric analysis of the effect of racial justice taxes on recreational marijuana demand.

11. Amherst and Cambridge, Massachusetts, are both set to release final recommendations between June 2023 and June 2024.

12. Public Law No. 117-2. American Rescue Plan Act. H.R. 1319, 117th Congress (2021).

Figure 2. Institutional Pathways for Municipal Reparations



Source: Author's diagram.

by a member, state efforts could be referred to any committee from Ways and Means to the assembly's state and local government committee.¹³ Like municipal initiatives, relatively few county and state-level reparations efforts were appropriated. The California State Task Force was the only state-level effort to be appropriated as of May 2023, while Fulton, Alameda, and Shelby Counties were appropriated

\$250,000, \$51,000, and \$5 million respectively for commission and research activities. All four task forces were appropriated from the general fund, as opposed to taxes levied on recreational cannabis sales. After their corresponding resolution passed, the commissions were to follow the same appointment, hearing, fact-finding, and recommendation phases as the municipal model.

13. Prospective efforts originated in the lower and upper legislative chambers in equal frequency. Because California is the only active state-level effort, the significance of A3121's origin in the lower house is unknown.

Table 1. Reparations Resolutions Coding Themes

Injustice	Black Disparity	Other
Slavery or chattel slavery	housing	noncomprehensive disclaimer
Jim Crow or segregation	health	racial wealth gap
Mass incarceration	economic or financial	H.R. 40
	employment	forty acres and a mule
	education	George Floyd
	entrepreneurship	apology

Source: Author's tabulation.

METHODOLOGY

To analyze nonfederal reparations proposals, I conducted a mixed-method analysis. Reparations efforts were identified using Boolean searching on a combination of the public legislative tracking software, BillTrack 50, and traditional search engines. Boolean search terms included *Black OR African Americans AND Reparations*, with queries periodically excluding known efforts.¹⁴ Results were not filtered for date, but, apart from Evanston, no results indicated local reparations efforts before 2017. Search terms primarily yielded local reporting on the introduction or passage of a reparations resolution, press releases, or original government documents (such as a meeting agenda) related to the same. Although the decision to exclude efforts that did not include the word *reparations* was primarily to adhere to requisite acknowledgment of harm and the redress process in the ARC framework, this search method also necessarily excluded efforts that did not include the word *reparations* for their lack of mechanizability.

After locations with reparations efforts were identified, I compiled each resolution or bill (and any subsequent or amending documents, for completeness) that committed to or established a process for reparations. A coding table was derived from three iterative reviews of each resolution, which I read for recurrent themes shared across three or more founding resolutions. Sources of injustice, evidence of disparity, and resolution language were noted by hand for each iteration. After three iterations,

themes were pooled to form the coding schematic presented in table 1. Reference to a theme was notated X, and the lack of one was indicated with a blank.

Because of the pervasiveness of the term *racial wealth gap* and *Black disparity* in reparations resolutions, I also sought to answer whether cities with reparations efforts demonstrated greater Black-White disparity on metrics related to the racial wealth gap than the nation as a whole. Counties and states were omitted from this portion of analysis due to relatively small sample sizes. I selected metrics that scholars have generally agreed contribute to the racial wealth gap: homeownership, poverty, annual median income, and postsecondary educational attainment (Oliver and Shapiro 2019; Hampton 2016; Muñoz et al. 2015). I tabulated the Black-White disparity for these values in each locality and aggregated them to form a city sample. Additionally, to determine if the city sample had a low Black (and therefore qualifying by most resolution's definition) population relative to the nation, I aggregated the Black-alone percentage for each municipality as a value in the city sample.

For measurements of Black-White disparity, hypotheses were as follows:

$$H_0: \bar{x}_c \leq \mu_n,$$

where μ_c is the population mean difference between the Black and White metric (such as poverty rate) in the city sample, and μ_n is the pop-

14. For example, a query to identify county-level task forces was *Black OR African American AND Reparations Fulton Alameda Washtenaw*. This query was increasingly difficult to use as the number of existing entities to exclude grew.

ulation mean difference between the Black and White metric in the nation.

$$H_A: \bar{x}_c > \mu_n$$

For measurements of the Black population share, hypotheses were as follows:

$$H_0: \bar{x}_c \leq \mu_n,$$

where μ_c is the population mean percentage of Black individuals in the city sample, and μ_n is the population mean percentage of Black individuals in the nation.

$$H_A: \bar{x}_c > \mu_n$$

I then performed five right-tailed one sample t-tests, assuming a normal population and to a significance of $\alpha = 0.05$, to determine if the city sample was greater than or equal to the nation as a whole.

CONCEPTIONS OF LOCAL REPARATIONS

The content of municipal reparations resolutions provides key insights into council conceptions of reparations, including acknowledgment, apology, injustice, modality, reconciliation, and closure. Sixteen municipal resolutions began with preambulatory statements providing justification for the municipality's commitment to reparations. When provided, justification for reparative action often mirrored the chronology of transgressions provided by Darity and Mullen, contextualized to reflect nexus points at which a municipality may have shared culpability for racist policy with the federal or state government. Fourteen reparations resolutions named slavery as an injury in need of remedy. Thirteen resolutions also identified Jim Crow-era discrimination as an injury in need of reconciliation. Specific references were often to segregation, acts of racial violence like lynching or the Chicago Race Riot, and redlining (City of Chicago 2020). Most resolutions named some form of modern discrimination, with mass incarceration appearing in eleven resolutions. Police brutality and overcriminalization also typically appeared in resolutions that name mass incarceration. Green-

belt did not include such language because its municipal reparations commission was formed by ballot initiative and included no preambulatory statements. After the acknowledgment of these injustices, five resolutions explicitly apologized to identified groups for the municipal government's role in harm. Fear of potential legal ramifications—namely, the ability for constituents to establish a claim against government using a codified apology—may contribute to the relative lack of slavery apologies observed in all collected reparations resolutions (Brooks 1999).

Resolutions also quantified the effect of these injustices with contextual measurements of disparity. Disparities in pre- and postsecondary education appeared most frequently in thirteen resolutions. Economic and financial disparity and health were cited in equal volume in twelve resolutions, as seen in table 2. The latter was often epitomized with disparities in annual median income and poverty, whereas the latter was often life-expectancy or fetal mortality. Housing and employment disparity appeared next most frequently, with ten and nine resolutions, respectively. Disparity in entrepreneurship, particularly small businesses, appeared in only four resolutions.

The emphasis on education-related disparity echoes scholarship on the relative popularity of education-related interventions for reparations, though employment and entrepreneurship appeared least of all disparity themes (Craemer 2020). Council resolutions also punctuated events with disparate racial outcomes to justify exploring reparations. Both the murder of George Floyd and the following public protests appeared in four resolutions, inclusive of St. Paul, mere miles from where Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. In the Detroit and Iowa City resolutions, councilmembers readily identified the union of the two subjects as the catalyzing events for the council's discussion about reparations (City of Detroit 2021; City of Iowa 2021).

The inclusion of the foremost forms of discrimination, namely, disparate economic and financial outcomes, may reflect how municipalities imagine both the scope and degree of their involvement in the proliferation of racist policy. Although health, housing, and educa-

Table 2. Reparations Disparity Themes (Municipal)

Geography	Housing	Employment	Economic	Education	Health	Entrepreneurship
Asheville	X		X	X	X	
Burlington	X	X	X	X	X	
Chicago		X	X	X		
Evanston	X	X	X	X	X	
Iowa City						
Providence						
San Francisco	X	X	X	X	X	X
St. Paul	X	X		X	X	X
High Point		X	X	X	X	
Greenbelt						
Detroit	X		X		X	
Boston				X		
Amherst			X	X	X	
Kansas City	X	X	X	X	X	X
Wilmington	X	X	X	X	X	
Berkeley	X	X	X	X	X	X
Cambridge	X		X	X	X	

Source: Author's tabulation.

tion are considered the domain of municipal and state governments, the maintenance of policies that influence small businesses, industry, and judicial conditions are often set by the federal government. A generous reading might suppose that the emphasis on education, housing, and health reflect existing federalist structures, aided further by the emphasis of early efforts (such as Evanston's) on housing policies like racist zoning and lending. A cynical reading might suppose that an emphasis on education and health over changes to unjust systems of violence requires mostly symbolic concessions, maintaining the status quo of racial hierarchy.

Few resolutions connected the question of reparations to its political history. Of nineteen municipal resolutions, only three tied their case for reparations in the federal government's failure to deliver the promise of "forty acres and a mule." Nine resolutions made specific reference to the introduction of H.R. 40 and the general federal reparations effort. Five resolutions included what might be termed a disclaimer of noncomprehensiveness, as seen in table 3. This statement, often in the preamble, first recognizes the federal government as

the primary provider for Black reparations, and thereafter declares the commitment to municipal reparations to be in concert with the pursuit of federal reparations. Some cities passed additional legislation supporting federal and state reparations efforts. Amherst, Massachusetts, passed such a resolution in support of H.R. 40/S.40, citing increasing municipal support for reparations as additional cause (City of Amherst 2021). In concert with a disclaimer of non-comprehensiveness, the appearance of H.R. 40 in some proposals suggests that municipal reparations efforts do not aim to replace federal reparations efforts but supplement them. Whether they do so for lack of financial resources or incorrect jurisdiction is not stated.

State and county reparations task force legislation contained slightly less variation. Legislation emphasizes housing and educational disparity most frequently, with seven out of eight states for the former and all eight in the case of the latter (see table 4). All county reparations resolutions emphasized discrimination and disparity in housing, education, health, and employment (see table 5). The cohesion of these spheres of disparity is likely influenced

Table 3. Reparations Injustice and Other Themes (Municipal)

Geography	Slavery	Jim Crow	Incarceration	George Floyd	H.R. 40	Racial Wealth Gap	Noncomprehensive
Asheville	X	X	X			X*	X
Burlington	X	X	X		X	X	
Chicago	X	X	X		X	X	
Evanston	X	X	X		X		
Iowa City				X			
Providence	X	X	X				X
San Francisco	X	X				X	
St. Paul	X	X	X	X	X	X	
High Point	X	X	X			X	
Greenbelt							
Detroit	X	X	X	X			
Boston	X	X			X	X	X
Amherst	X			X	X		
Kansas City	X	X	X			X	
Wilmington	X	X	X		X	X	
Berkeley		X	X		X	X	X
Cambridge	X	X	X		X	X	X

Source: Author's tabulation.

Table 4. Reparations Disparity Themes (State)

State	Housing	Employment	Economic	Education	Health	Entrepreneurship
Georgia	X	X	X	X	X	
Connecticut	X	X	X	X	X	
Vermont	X	X	X	X		
Massachusetts	X		X	X	X	
New York	X			X		
Oregon	X	X	X	X	X	
New Jersey	X			X	X	
California		X	X	X		

Source: Author's tabulation.

Table 5. Reparations Disparity Themes (County)

County	Housing	Employment	Economic	Education	Health	Entrepreneurship
Fulton, Georgia	X	X	X	X	X	
Washtenaw, Michigan	X		X	X	X	
Shelby, Tennessee	X			X	X	X
Kalamazoo, Michigan	X	X		X	X	
Alameda, California	X	X		X	X	

Source: Author's tabulation.

Table 6. Reparations Injustice and Other Themes (State)

State	Slavery	Jim Crow	Incarceration	George Floyd	H.R. 40	Racial Wealth Gap	Noncomprehensive
Georgia	X	X	X				
Connecticut	X		X				
Vermont	X	X	X				
Maine	X	X	X			X	
New York	X	X	X				
Oregon	X		X			X	
New Jersey	X	X	X			X	
California	X	X	X				

Source: Author's tabulation.

Table 7. Reparations Injustice and Other Themes (County)

County	Apology	Slavery	Jim Crow	Incarceration	George Floyd	H.R. 40	Racial Wealth Gap	Noncomprehensive
Fulton, Georgia		X	X	X			X	
Washtenaw, Michigan								
Shelby, Tennessee		X					X	
Kalamazoo, Michigan		X	X	X				X
Alameda, California	X	X	X	X				

Source: Author's tabulation.

by the large volume of shared language between resolutions and H.R. 40. H.R. 40's preambulatory statements naming harm against Black Americans emphasize "share cropping, convict leasing, Jim Crow, redlining, unequal education, and disproportionate treatment at the hands of the criminal justice system" as the principal harms for which reparations should atone. H.R. 40 also names "debilitating economic, educational, and health hardships" including mass incarceration, high Black unemployment, and a substantial Black-White racial wealth gap as demonstrable of slavery's continuing effects. Thus, all resolutions influenced by H.R. 40 have the same notions of injustice and disparity. Curiously, no state resolution mentions the resolution by name (see table 6). Similarly, few resolutions emphasize the telling nature of the racial wealth gap in quantifying slavery-originating disparity. Finally, only one county resolution includes a disclaimer of non-

comprehension or references to ongoing federal reparations efforts (see table 7).

GEOGRAPHIES OF MUNICIPAL REPARATIONS

As presented in table 8, individuals living in municipalities with reparations efforts generally reported lower indicators of socioeconomic status when aggregated into one reparations municipalities group. The median and mean annual median household income for reparations cities were lower than the national value, the latter demonstrating an \$8,000 difference. Overall poverty was also 6 percent higher in cities pursuing local reparations than the national poverty rate. Owner-occupancy was far lower in reparations cities, with a more than 20 percent deficit relative to the national rate. Cities with reparations, however, are more educated than the nation. The average and mean percentage of persons with a high school

Table 8. Reparations Municipalities Overall Metrics

Characteristic	United States	City Median	City Mean
Poverty rate	0.116	0.1735	0.184444
Median household income (in 2021 dollars), 2017–2021	69021	58311.5	65668.44
Owner-occupied housing unit rate, 2017–2021	0.646	0.4555	0.452722
High school graduate or higher, percentage of persons age twenty-five years+, 2017–2021	0.889	0.896	0.900222
Bachelor’s degree or higher, percentage of persons age twenty-five years+, 2017–2021	0.337	0.4945	0.495333
Gini coefficient	0.4848	0.5112	0.5048

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2021.

diploma or higher was slightly higher than the national value, but both the median and mean percentage of postsecondary degree holders was greater than the national value by more than 10 percent. Cities with reparations also reported higher Gini coefficients, indicating greater general income inequality. These characteristics are likely influenced by the presence of major metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) in the sample.

When examining Black-White disparity across these metrics, it is apparent that Black individuals in reparations localities are not necessarily representative of the national population. Black individuals, on average, reported lower values on metrics related to wealth. Although the Black annual median income of the nation is \$46,401, that of the city sample was \$39,760. Similarly, reparations cities demonstrated a higher average Black poverty rate of 25 percent, nearly 4 percent higher than national levels. The rate of Black owner-occupancy yields the largest disparity, with the owner-occupancy rate in reparations cities more than sixteen percentage points lower than the national rate. The mean value for postsecondary educational attainment is a small exception to this trend. The mean value for Blacks was nearly 2 percent higher in reparations cities than the national value.

Measurements of Black-White disparity in reparations cities yield somewhat antithetical results to the preceding analysis. As shown in table 9, reparations cities fail all one-tail t-tests of significance for measurements of Black-White difference in annual median income, pov-

erty, owner-occupancy rate, and postsecondary educational attainment. Cities with reparations efforts also fail a test of statistical significance for the percentage of Black individuals with a *p*-value of .46.

If we are to interpret cities with more severe Black-White disparity wealth metrics and higher Black populations as locations for which reparations policies are best suited, there is not enough evidence to suggest that disparity is worse in cities with reparations efforts than in the United States as a whole. There is also not enough evidence to show that cities with reparations have Black population percentages that are meaningfully larger than the national percentage. This is to say, the current cities leading the charge for municipal reparations do not demonstrate greater need than other municipalities, and the existing local reparations proposals will not serve a larger maximum portion of their population than a federal reparations effort might serve the whole of eligible Black recipients.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REPARATIONS POLICIES

Due in part to the temporal limitations of the reparations commission model, few municipalities have published recommendations for reparations policies. The Providence Municipal Reparations Commission proposed its 11-Point Investment Plan to close “the present-day racial wealth and equity gap” (City of Providence 2022, 5) in August 2022. Given Providence’s eligibility cannot be constrained by race, the proposed budget line items extend to a much larger por-

Table 9. One-Sample T-Tests for Significance of Black-White Difference

	Black-White Poverty Difference	Black-White Annual Median Income Difference	Black-White Homeownership Difference	Black-White Education Difference
United States	.04	-27132	-.328	-.14
Amherst Town, Massachusetts	-0.005	-5380	-0.27162	-.437
Asheville, North Carolina (city)	.129	-29026	-.1547	-.397
Berkeley, California (city)	.083	-80132	-.19946	-.526
Boston, Massachusetts (city)	.09	-61705	-.12116	-.481
Burlington, Vermont (city)	.16	-33683	-.27002	-.217
Cambridge, Massachusetts (city)	.194	-87370	-.21444	-.469
Chicago, Illinois	.19	-55210	-.18621	-.424
Detroit Michigan (city)	.015	-11070	-.7942	-.23
Evanston, Illinois (city)	.043	-50026	-.30273	-.523
Greenbelt, Maryland (city)	.081	-15839	-.44698	-.266
High Point, North Carolina (city)	.113	-23658	-.30722	-.252
Iowa City, Iowa	.082	-26020	-.42985	-.433
Kansas City, Missouri	0.153	-33962	-0.82518	-0.294
Los Angeles	0.138	-47636	-0.21521	-0.29
Providence, Rhode Island (city)	0.096	-23956	-0.12673	-0.269
San Francisco, California (city)	0.192	-112292	-0.15304	-0.464
St. Paul, Minnesota	0.214	-38408	-0.42501	-0.366
Wilmington, Delaware (city)	0.181	-35584	-0.22019	-0.403
Sample mean	.119388889	-42830.9	-0.27495	-0.3745
Sample standard deviation	.064004723	28029.01	.174506	.103376
Test statistic	.292355621	-.13202	.071648	-0.53467
P-value	.386776385	.551739	.471859	.700099

Source: Author's tabulation.

Note: Cities were selected from available and consistent geographies across U.S. Census data. For example, although California has both town and a city named Berkeley, because the City of Berkeley passed a reparations resolution, data for Berkeley City, California, was most appropriate.

tion of the population than other proposals. If we (incorrectly) assume all 21,068 Black-alone, adult Providence residents qualify, the maximum budget allocation for each individual is a mere \$474.65 (U.S. Census Bureau 2015):

Total Budget Allocation / Total Qualifying
Population = Maximum Individual Benefit
(assuming cash disbursement).

\$10 million / 21,068 = \$321.12

If the qualifying population is limited to individuals of all races below the poverty level (an estimated 37,402 individuals), that number decreases to \$267.36 (U.S. Census Bureau 2021).

This estimate neglects to remove the portions of the budget allocated for immaterial benefits, including but not limited to “reimagining buildings and sites,” “invest in media firms,” “preserve, safeguard & promote cultural programs,” and the “creation of policy and research center” (City of Providence 2022, 5). Other proposals are explicitly universalist, including the creation of a resident scholarship fund and the creation of a “K-12 Curriculum Grounded In Rhode Island & New England History” (City of Providence 2022). Removing these items alone reduces the budgeted funds by \$1.35 million. The largest portion of the budget is the seed funding for the United Way COVID-19 Equity Fund at \$1,750,000. The Prov-

idence proposal thus contains only nine line items related to its purported goal of closing the racial wealth gap, for a total investment of \$6.4 million to all qualifying groups. Even if every Black and Indigenous person received an equal portion of the full amount of the \$10 million, the allotment would have no effect on the municipality's current Black-White annual income gap of more than \$16,000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2019a, 2019b).

The San Francisco Reparations Plan, published in December 2022, offered more concrete recommendations for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. The report recommended all qualifying individuals receive a "one-time, lump sum payment of \$5 million" as compensation for past harm, in addition to economic and opportunity loss (San Francisco African American Reparations Advisory Committee 2022, 33). The proposed financial reparations also include infrastructural and educational reparations, including the introduction of tax credits for recipients, the creation of a public bank (an initiative ineligible populations could also presumably benefit from), financial education, and the establishment of a Black Reparations Trust.

The estimated Black-White racial income gap in San Francisco is more than \$70,000, with median annual income of White households at \$116,000 versus just \$30,000 for Black households (San Francisco Human Rights Commission 2020). If each recipient were to receive \$5 million, this could more than close the racial wealth gap, particularly with households with more than one qualifying individual. It is difficult, though, to estimate how much of a proposed reparation payment would be retained by an individual. The recommendation report is silent as to whether such payment would be subject to state or federal taxes. Generally, settlements related to injury and physical illness are exempt from gross taxable income, except for those awarded for punitive damages.¹⁵ Additionally, some portion of an individual's reparation payment would likely be used to dissolve debt. An estimated 13 percent of communities with more than 60 percent residents of color have debt in collections in San Francisco

(Carther et al. 2022). Despite the relatively small population of Black individuals in the city relative to other racial groups, if we are to assume both higher consumer debt and more debt in collections for Black people, a percentage of reparations payments will merely be used to dissolve outstanding negative wealth. The recommended plan does include the elimination of Black student debt, in addition to a debt forgiveness program. No funding source has been identified for these recommendations because they have not yet been adopted by the Board of Supervisors.

Similarly, the California Reparations Task Force is the only state-level effort to have any publicly available recommendations. The 2022 Interim Task Force Report makes nearly one hundred recommendations on topics from political disenfranchisement to housing segregation and secondary education. Some recommendations would strengthen the civil rights of all Californians with the elimination of policies such as forced penal employment through the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and discrimination against justice-involved individuals in the juror selection process. Others purport more intangible benefits, such as integrating conversations about race and ethnicity into K–12 education. Most are targeted universalist in nature, with a prospective beneficiary class that includes more Black individuals than a race-conscious approach, but failing to exclude those who are not Black or slavery-descended. The report is largely silent on the Black-White racial wealth gap, the only consistently shared metric for efficacy across efforts. The final 2023 report, in contrast, explicitly recommends the use of the racial wealth gap as a metric for calculating reparations payments only for federal reparations efforts (California Office of the Attorney General 2023, 787).

Washington State House Bill 1474, by virtue of never creating a task force, did not include publicly available recommendations. Instead, the bill created a housing fund and program for communities adversely affected by redlining and racially restrictive covenants with a \$100 fine on home purchases. Qualifying individuals can turn to the program for down payment and

15. *Commissioner v. Schleier*, 515 U.S. 323 (1995).

cost assistance. Notably, eligible populations do include ethnicities other than African American, including Jewish, Japanese, and Indigenous Americans (Groover 2023). The bill does not cite slavery reparations in its preambulatory clauses, evidencing the broader issues with the colloquial use of the term “reparations” in reference to its commonly understood definition as recourse for the enslavement of Black Americans. However, the fund’s applicability to ethnicities beyond African American, while under the greater umbrella of reparative policy interventions, might be viewed as a similarly targeted universalist approach as found in the 2022 Interim California Task Force Report.

REPARATIONS MODALITIES AND PATH DEPENDENCY

The prevalence of reparations recommendations that function to aid poverty and decrease civil rights abuses for a broad community suggests a qualified view of acceptable modalities. The inclusion of financial literacy in the Providence recommendations report demonstrates the pervasiveness of the Black financial illiteracy myth in the reparations policy space. Proponents of the line item argue that the racial wealth gap may be meaningfully narrowed solely by improving financial literacy in Black communities, inclusive of investment, entrepreneurship, and household savings. Scholarly examination repeatedly yields countering findings (Darity et al. 2018; Hamilton and Darity 2017). Additionally, the possible inclusion of White beneficiaries in the Providence recommendations, in addition to the current lack of direct benefit models, constructs a reparations model that is a far cry from its international human rights precedent.

The very model of local reparations begs further examination. All municipal proposals, save for the City of Berkeley’s reparations consultant, mimic the structure of H.R. 40. Four states used the language of H.R. 40 verbatim, including New Jersey, Vermont, and California. Several resolutions reference parallel municipal reparations efforts in preambulatory statements, listing emerging precedent as additional cause to explore reparations in their locality. The proliferation of the commission model does not necessarily signal the efficacy

of such a model. The failure of Chicago’s commission to meet after its Health and Human Services designation is a testament to the importance of administrative will in the progress of commission activities. The member appointment process can take as long as a year in the case of Iowa City (Foley 2021). This assumes sufficient qualification and general administrative efficiency of commission activities.

The duplication of the commission model may be a case of path dependency. As policy-makers approach the issue of reparations with a lack of existing policy options in the policy universe and political hesitancy, adapting the commission model to their locality minimizes risk with both its more than thirty-year precedent and federal-originating policy diffusion. This is not to say that municipalities do not compile commissions or task forces to examine constituent issues. Instead, it highlights municipal conceptions of reparations as a public policy issue rather than a legal one. As opposed to a municipality expressing interest in reparations for its Black or slavery-descended residents, it appears that city governments identify severe Black disparity in their jurisdiction and choose exploratory reparations commissions as an intervention to improve the observed disparity. If path dependency continues to shape conceptions of reparations, we might anticipate forthcoming recommendation reports to emphasize homeownership and urban development in their proposed interventions. The efficacy of improving homeownership alone in alleviating the racial wealth gap, however, is debated (Fu 2022; Darity et al. 2018).

The merit of local reparations efforts despite their limited resources continues to be defended by advocacy organizations notably involved in the development of such efforts. Proponents such as Kamm Howard, former national chair of N’COBRA, advocate municipal reparations in concert with federal reparations for their timeliness. Howard said, “local reparations acts as an emergency triage. You can’t do everything right away, but you do what you can to stop the bleeding” (quoted in Rolfes and Howard 2023). This supposes that municipal reparations efforts are sufficiently resourced to observably improve outcomes and effective at distributing resources. In the case of local rep-

arations, both the latter and the former remain to be seen.

Proponents of local reparations also argue such efforts will diffuse upward to the federal level. In the same interview, Howard likened local reparations to sit-ins and other acts of civil disobedience in the civil rights era (quoted in Rolfes and Howard 2023). This assumes that local reparations will be both effective and not detrimental to the policy diffusion advocates espouse they will facilitate. There is some indication that local reparations policies have a bottom-up effect. As municipal efforts have increased in volume, so have citations of Evanston, Asheville, and Burlington in the efforts of new cities. It is unclear, though, whether the presence of a municipal reparations effort increases the likelihood of a county- or state-level effort. California is the only state with both state and municipal reparations efforts. Massachusetts and Vermont have both active municipal efforts and prospective state-level efforts, but the relationship between these efforts is unclear. In the case of Vermont, it may be significant that the primary sponsor of H432 represents Burlington.

Given local reparations efforts are not occurring where socioeconomic indicators would indicate that Black Americans experience the most severe Black-White disparities and locations with reparations efforts are no more disadvantaged than the nation's Black population as a whole, the value of local reparations proposals is likely not in their proximity to need. Further, many cities with reparations were already politically progressive, boasting equally left-leaning academic institutions like University of California Berkeley, University of Massachusetts Amherst, and Harvard University. These universities occasionally directly influenced the policymaking process, with professors often being representatives on task forces. In liberal bastions when where Black individuals are underrepresented, the value of local reparations may be more political than material. Reparations resolutions analyzed in this article

occasionally cited one another, forming a network that has pushed the boundaries of feasible reparations in public policy. Still, even with a nascent collective identity and continued public interest, local reparations proposals currently lack both the resources and support to yield comprehensive and transformative redress.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This research has some limitations. No comprehensive national data set for the racial-wealth gap in varying U.S. geographies currently exists, making estimating Black-White disparity across a consistent metric a difficult task. Moreover, analyzing Black-White disparity assumes that it is generally meaningful across all cities. Because urban geographies generally demonstrate higher inequality than rural geographies (Bishaw and Posey 2016), the urban-rural divide may have a confounding effect on observed Black-White wealth disparity. How the racial wealth gap differs by urban and rural geographies is in need of greater scholarly consideration. Finally, the severity of Black-White disparity in a municipality may not be related to the introduction of a reparations proposal. Electoral politics, interest group pressures, and public unrest likely influenced the introduction and passage of city-level reparations proposals. The preceding analysis cannot speak to why reparations were proposed in certain geographies,¹⁶ but rather the severity of the disparities most often cited by resolutions in cities with reparations efforts, and the motivating factors, conceptions of reparations, and politics of race that could be discerned from those resolutions.

CONCLUSION

Between 2020 and 2023, policymakers on every level of government broached the topic of reparations. Municipalities undeniably lead this charge with nineteen cities with current reparations efforts and continuing calls for reparations in the likes of Greenwood, Oklahoma,

16. To some degree, even the distinction of governments into city, county, and state may warrant further consideration. Asheville's Reparations Commission, for example, includes members appointed by both the City of Asheville and Buncombe County, North Carolina. Further research might benefit from analyzing reparations proposals as events that may have had one place of origin but drew elements from or were carried to other localities.

Sacramento, California, and Reading, Pennsylvania. These cities are pioneering local fact-finding and reparative policy interventions for addressing systemic harm at a volume unparalleled by historic reparations efforts to date. Although enterprising, current local reparations efforts are still plagued by several failings. Whereas resolutions to study reparations proposals are often in cities with higher costs of living and lower indicators of wealth, they tend to have relatively small qualifying populations by having few Black residents. There is also not enough evidence to justify reparations on the grounds that local disparities in components of wealth are meaningfully higher than national values. Moreover, cities and counties continue to fail to allocate funding to the necessary quantity and policy intervention type to achieve their occasionally stated goal of reducing the Black-White racial wealth gap.

Even though local reparations efforts have grown in popularity, they still cover a relatively small proportion of Black Americans. The nineteen municipalities with reparations efforts, for example, constitute only 0.0974 percent of all 19,500 incorporated towns. These municipalities may be home to more than two million Black Americans, but they make up only 5 percent of the nearly fifty million Americans who identify as Black or African American (Moslimani et al. 2023). Although it does not appear that the local reparations movement is intended to supplant federal reparations efforts, acknowledgment of the limited resources and scope of local efforts reinforces the importance of advocacy for federal reparations.

In the absence of additional recommendations, the question of reparations is still one of politics rather than policy. Council members are crafting their own definition of reparations while proponents aim to reframe them, hesitant policymakers qualify them, and constituents attempt to redefine them to meet their individual needs. Without a clear unifying creed, a path forward with eligibility, scale, method, efficacy metrics, and cause, the future of local reparations remains to be seen.

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